

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Alexander Melville Bell and Eliza Symonds Bell, January 18, 1881, with transcript

Letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his Parents. Volta Laboratory, 1221 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C., January 18th, 1881. Dear Papa and Mama:

Knowing me of old you have doubtless conjectured — and conjectured correctly — that “no letter or telegram” meant that we had arrived safely at our destination in due time.

Mabel has been busy with her house and babies and I have been upon the sofa most of the time since in the doctor's hands. He says I am now suffering for inventing the Photophone and for abusing my strength for months together by night work. He has condemned me to inaction and non-excitement for some time to come — and promises me a complete recovery if I only obey him for a short time now.

My heart has been acting in such an irregular and eccentric manner since our arrival here that I have been quite in low spirits — and unable to write a cheerful letter. But to-day I am so much better and feel so much like believing the doctor's promises that I send you a few lines. The doctor's idea is to rest the heart as much as possible — so I lie down on the sofa the greater part of the day and take some medicine that has reduced my pulse to 56 beats per minute and I certainly do feel much more hopeful to-day. This is the first day that I have been entirely free from spasmodic action of the heart — and I have no doubt now that — as I am perfectly well otherwise — rest, freedom from excitement, regular meals and early retiring to rest will soon set me up again.

When we reached Canandaigua we found no accommodation had been secured for us and the sleeping car was full with the exception of two sections which were for sale at

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Elmira and could not therefore be secured before. On Monday morning I had telegraphed for “stateroom and two sections” and on Monday afternoon a Mr. Bell wrote from Canada for the stateroom alone for the same evening (Thursday). The officials thinking that the two Bells were the same individual and that the letter (being of later date than the telegram) countermanded the order for the “two sections” — secured the stateroom for Mr. Bell No. 2 and left Bell No. 1 without any accommodation!

The conductor telegraphed to Elmira to secure the two sections for me if possible — but upon reaching that station we found they had been already sold! Here was a dilemma — and the poor conductor was terribly perplexed. I told him that I held the Company responsible for the mistake — and the position I assumed was this.

I was in possession then of two sections — and I declined to give them up to the Elmira people unless equivalent accommodation was given to me on the car. I said that his remedy was to tell me to leave the car. I would at once do so and go to a hotel — charging all expenses to the company in an action I would bring against them. The poor conductor was at his wits ends and tears came into his eyes as he said he would not do so ungentlemanly an action as tell us to leave the car. He called the train conductor into consultation but they were unable to arrive at any conclusion. I was obstinate and refused to move unless on the distinct understanding that I was turned out of the car. I stated I did not think I could have a case against the company otherwise. I forgot to say that fortunately one section proved to be vacant from Canandaigua so that the babies were put to bed at once — so the poor conductor had to take the responsibility of turning us out and routing the babies and nurses out of their beds in addition. My obstinacy brought relief and in about half an hour a section was placed at my disposal and we retired to rest. I don't know how it was done — excepting that two or three gentlemen were shifted about in the car — but it was done — although I offered to accept a lower berth in lieu of a section. The conductor (who was very gentlemanly) gave a great sigh of relief.

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His troubles were not over however as we missed our valise on reaching Washington. The poor man has been unwell and called upon us to-day to say he would personally hunt the bag out and send it to us.

I enclose letters received to-day from Chester and Charlie which will probably give you the latest news of them — for I presume they are Bells! — and therefore write as seldom as possible!

After the exertion of writing to me I presume they will think it unnecessary to write to Brantford! so I forward their letters.

You will see by the heading of this paper how I have named my Laboratory.

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I told you of Tainter's discovery of the loud sound produced from worsted when exposed to intermittent light. He has followed up this with a very important discovery which is communicated to you now confidentially: viz — that the expensive selenium can be replaced by so cheap a material as —? — lampblack! The electric resistance of lampblack is certainly affected by radiations from the sun. He connected a telephone in circuit with a smoked-glass-plate using a battery of twelve cells (Leclanche). In order to complete the circuit the current had to pass over the carbon surface. When he threw an intermittent beam of sunlight on the lampblack surface a clear musical tone was emitted by the telephone in circuit with it. For my benefit he connected his lampblack in circuit with the telephone line leading to this house(which is by the bye No. 1302 Connecticut Avenue) and I heard here in my study the effect of the beam of sunlight which was allowed to fall on the smoked glass in the Laboratory!

Mr. Tainter has also found that the noise produced directly from the lampblack surface when sunlight is thrown upon it is so loud that it can be heard at a distance of several feet away! It is no longer necessary to place the ear near the illuminated surface!

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These are germs of important discoveries yet to come — and I find it hard to rest here with the laboratory so close at hand.

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I had a drive amongst the hills surrounding Washington on Saturday — and have found a place for sale — that I think would tempt you. The owner is to call upon me tomorrow to state terms etc.

I am looking all round here and as soon as allowed will go on another exploring expedition. I think it would be much the nicest thing if you could come near Washington. A summer location would not do so well — for I am sure Mabel would want to go to a fresh place such summer. If we could find some place that would suit you near enough to be accessible from here every day I would build a permanent laboratory beside you — to which I could go every day. I don't think it is good for me to have my laboratory so near my house. It is a great temptation to run over there all the time — especially at night. You will be glad to hear that our affairs are prospering. Our income this year from American sources alone is over twenty-four thousand dollars — and if foreign telephone interests turn out of value it will probably reach \$27,000. We should be able to live upon that. I only hope we may have health and strength to enjoy it.

With much love, Alec. P. S. Thanks for Brantford newspapers and for Weekly Globe. AGB.